

AWARDS 2007 GAMES



THQ Company of Heroes

It's been almost a full year since its release, but Company of Heroes hasn't aged at all. The premise of a World War II strategy game may not be the most original, but this is an incredibly well-produced game that tweaks the stale RTS genre.

In most RTS games, you can hide behind your defences while building up a huge arsenal before venturing forth to steamroller your opponent. Here, you have to capture strategic points on the map to gain the resources necessary for extra troops, vehicles and fortifications.

The game looks stunning and it's one of the few available with a DirectX 10 graphics patch, so you can make full use of the latest graphics technology. The towns and countryside of northern France are lushly rendered and packed with atmosphere. Zooming in on your troops and vehicles shows a satisfactory level of detail for a first-person shooter from a couple of years back.

The gameplay is fast and fun, with hectic battles packed full of explosive action. But behind it all is a solid basis of tactical realism. Units function as you'd expect, with infantry, tanks and artillery all playing their role. A massed charge is rarely successful in Company of Heroes; instead, you have to soften up your enemy with long-range weapons such as mortars before sending in a combined force of tanks and infantry to overwhelm what's left.

Your infantry units are particularly flexible in this game. Not only can they occupy buildings, they can also dig their own trenches and defensive positions, be

upgraded with a range of heavy weapons, and capture enemy artillery. This has to be positioned with a specific fire arc, though, and so can be outflanked by a wily opponent.

The lengthy single-player campaign is helped along with slick in-game cut scenes. There's also a skirmish mode for playing quick games against the AI or online matches against real opponents. The only downside is that you can play only as the Germans or Americans.

With great graphics and compelling gameplay, Company of Heroes is a game that will appeal to anyone who's ever enjoyed a strategy title.

STRATEGY GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 64MB graphics card, 6.5GB disk space **PRODUCT CODE** B000GJEF2E **LATEST PRICE** £13 inc VAT from www.play.com
DETAILS www.companyofheroesgame.com **FULL REVIEW** Jan 2007



▲ The company we keep: Company of Heroes is visually stunning and full of explosive action

EXPERT'S REPORT

It hasn't been a great year for PC games. Nothing challenged Half-Life 2 or Battlefield 2 for their respective single and multiplayer crowns, and so we have no award for a first-person shooter.

There was good news for strategy fans, however. The RTS genre saw a long-awaited resurgence with Company of Heroes, Supreme Commander and Command and Conquer 3. Because of the rush of such titles, we've given two awards to strategy titles.

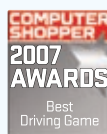
Online role-playing games continue to go from strength to strength and proved impossible to ignore this year.

Let's all hope that 2008 provides us with some more immediate gaming pleasures, preferably featuring big sci-fi guns.

Seth Barton

Video and games expert

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CODEMASTERS Colin McRae: DiRT

Colin McRae will be sorely missed, but DiRT stands as a great tribute to his skills. It's the most realistic driving game yet, focusing on the driving surfaces as well as the cars. The gravel, tarmac, mud and grass in this game really do feel like the treacherous ever-changing surfaces they are supposed to be.

The feeling of interaction with the road surface makes the game exceptional fun to play, and the effect is reinforced by some of the best graphics we've seen.

As well as the traditional lone rallying, there are head-to-head races and a range of off-road vehicles, including dune buggies and big rigs. DiRT maintains a sense of realism, while being far more fun than a simulation, and is easily the best racer of the year.



DRIVING GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 3GHz processor, 1GB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 12GB disk space **PRODUCT CODE** B000GJEF2E **LATEST PRICE** £18 inc VAT from www.play.com **DETAILS** www.codemasters.com **FULL REVIEW** Sep 2007



CODEMASTERS Lord of the Rings: Shadows of Angmar

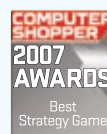
Lord of the Rings: Shadows of Angmar is an online gaming experience that will be familiar to anyone who's read the books or seen the films. Large areas of Middle Earth have been re-created in painstaking detail, just waiting to be explored by your character.

Early quests ease you into the game, while later areas become increasingly dark and menacing. Combat works well, with the emphasis on physical attacks rather than magic. Once you get to level 10, you can take control of a monster character.

This is a highly enjoyable game, and the community is friendlier than in Warcraft. It's a great introduction to online role playing, and essential for Tolkien fans.



ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 1.8GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 64MB graphics card, 12GB disk space **PRODUCT CODE** B000FNA2D2 **LATEST PRICE** £25 inc VAT plus £9 a month from www.amazon.co.uk **DETAILS** www.lotro.com **FULL REVIEW** Sep 2007



THQ Supreme Commander

At first glance, Supreme Commander seems like a lot of other RTS games, but you soon realise it is working on a far grander scale than most.

The biggest maps measure 81km across, a distance that would take your armoured command robot 40 minutes to cross. The huge battles look incredible, though not as atmospheric as Company of Heroes' gritty skirmishes. The opposing armies of shiny war machines obliterate each other with thrilling efficiency. The control system is powerful, allowing you to command hundreds of units simultaneously.

Supreme Commander is the perfect game for sci-fi strategy fans with a touch of megalomania.



STRATEGY GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 6.5GB disk space **PRODUCT CODE** B000FNA2QY **LATEST PRICE** £13 inc VAT from www.play.com **DETAILS** www.supremecommander.com **FULL REVIEW** Apr 2007



▲ Fellow soldiers die (and are replaced) in their droves in Medal of Honor: Airborne

EA Medal of Honor: Airborne

★★★★★

£25 inc VAT

This first-person shooter isn't the most reverential approach to World War II, but it works. Historical accuracy dwindles in the face of a new-found freedom in the new Medal of Honor game. Rather than trudging from A to B and shooting every Nazi en route, here you parachute into a level and land at a point of your choice. There are set objectives to deal with, but they can be tackled in any order you prefer, or stumble into, and can be approached via whichever route you think best.

There's no walking through long, narrow corridors here. You might leap across rooftops, use ruined buildings for cover, or just sprint through the open to reach your target. Dropping directly into a nest of Germans and somehow surviving is hardly a realistic way to fight a war, but it does add a much-needed fresh edge to a genre that's been milked dry.

Weapons are liberated, too. If you're most comfortable with sniper rifles or shotguns you're allowed to stick to them, rather than being forced to use something else because it's the only ammo around. Pushing suspension of disbelief perhaps a little too far are the upgrades. Use the same gun for long enough, and you'll earn extra parts, improving its accuracy or clip size, or adding a secondary ability such as a grenade launcher. Getting every upgrade can quickly become an obsession, adding a slightly silly collecting element to the game.

That's the nature of Airborne, though. By the time the Nazi super-soldiers turn up, somehow able to survive four grenades to the face, it's quite clear the game has given up pretending it has anything remotely serious to say about World War II. It's a bold move, but after a patchy few years of repetition and tedium this game has successfully revived a distinctly tired-looking franchise.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ No more corridor-pounding
- ✓ Intense and enjoyably over the top
- ✗ Very short

STRATEGY GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2.8GHz processor, 1GB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 1.5GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE B000PTJHKA SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.ea.com/moh/airborne/index.jsp



▲ Injecting unusual substances in BioShock can have electrifying results

2K GAMES BioShock

★★★★★

£26 inc VAT

There aren't many games that marry hitting people in the face with a wrench and intellectual pondering upon the nature of man. BioShock is the most important shooter in years because of it. On the surface, it's a superior action game, allowing you to tailor your weapons and abilities to best suit you. Genetic modifications called Plasmids grant you new attacks and abilities. These can often be used in devilish ways, like electrifying a flooded room to kill multiple foes with one blast. Underneath, BioShock is telling a story, which, though never completely free of B-movie sensibilities, offers a depth that is almost unheard of in video games.

Much of it works precisely because BioShock is so aware that it's a game. Thus, its setting isn't mere scenery; the underwater city of Rapture is a creation of genius, and one that you really experience and explore rather than simply look at. The gorgeous and haunting Art Deco styling and early 20th-century soundtrack give Rapture a unique aesthetic.

Combat is the core of the game, but even that goes to places other shooters never consider. This is certainly true of the foes that you encounter, such as Splicers, which are humans that have been turned insane by self-imposed genetic modification. BioShock goes to great lengths to add visual and vocal tics that hint as to the sort of person that the Splicer once was. There's less of this in the game's final stages, but when it is there it goes a long way to making Rapture feel like a real place, and one where a genuine tragedy took place.

Throw in a gut-wrenching moral dilemma or two, a lot of genuinely effective frights and some of the best dialogue you'll ever hear in a game, and BioShock is an instant classic. There are a few narrative blips, and the game occasionally resorts to tired, unlock-the-locked-door challenges, but on the whole this game represents an impressive leap forward.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ Beautiful and unique
- ✓ Unprecedented depth of storytelling
- ✓ You can play it your way

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2.4GHz processor, 1GB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 8GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE B000V1VZNE
SUPPLIER www.play.com DETAILS www.cultofrapture.com



▲ The Settlers: Rise of an Empire is a beautiful-looking game that is full of intricate details

UBISOFT The Settlers: Rise of an Empire

★★★★

£18 inc VAT

This once-adored strategy series has been in freefall for years. The Settlers: Rise of an Empire is an attempt to restore the name and re-establish the appeal of the first couple of Settlers games. Mostly, it gets it right.

The charm of the concept is in diligently constructing a medieval city of labour and commerce. Find the right resources on the map, such as deer for meat, wood for buildings and iron for swords, and you can grow your settlement gradually. As you do so, the activity in it increases. Seeing more settlers happily going about their labour and leisure is a fine visual reward for your hard work.

Combat inevitably comes into play in the later stages of a mission. Though it can sometimes seem a rude interruption to your careful construction, it's light of touch. Soldiers are created in the same way as any other goods in the game, and it's simply a matter of having enough and pointing them in the right direction.

The trouble is that it's all much more about pleasantness than being challenging. This is fine if you fancy a break from the usual hectic style of gaming, but it starts to wear thin after a while. There's a limited number of problems to overcome, most of which stem from dealing with the lack of a resource or two. After a few sessions of Settlers, you'll be very conscious of doing the same thing again and again. This reduces the game's long-term appeal, and it's unlikely that you'll return to it often.

Rise of an Empire is a return to the core values of the series: simply enjoying what you've made. As such, it will work better as an occasional treat than a fortnight of intense play. Awful voice acting is a further problem, but if you focus on the huge visual charm of the dozens of incidental animations you'll find a game with a lot of charm, if not longevity.

Ben Riley

SUMMARY

- ✓ Detailed and super-cute world
- ✓ Focuses on construction not conquest
- ✗ Can feel a bit bland and samey

MANAGEMENT GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 2GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE B000S8JO42 SUPPLIER www.play.com
DETAILS <http://thesettlers.uk.ubi.com>